

Press Release
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The Peregrine Falcon Is Back!
Babbitt Announces Removal of
World's Fastest Bird From Endangered Species List

Today, the world's fastest bird soars off of the endangered species list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed the peregrine falcon from the list of endangered and threatened species, marking one of the most dramatic success stories of the Endangered Species Act.

"It's a spectacular summer for America's great birds, the bald eagle, the Aleutian Canada goose and today the peregrine falcon," said the Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt. "And beneath the wings of all their recovery stands America's great law: the Endangered Species Act."

The peregrine once ranged throughout much of North America from the subarctic boreal forests of Alaska and Canada south to Mexico. A medium-sized raptor, the falcon nests on tall cliffs or urban skyscrapers and hunts other birds for food, reaching speeds of 200 miles an hour as it dives after its prey. While those nesting in the lower latitudes migrate shorter distances, if at all, peregrines nesting in Alaska and Canada are well known for their long spring and fall flights to and from wintering areas in Latin and South America.

The bird's remarkable speed and agility, however, could do nothing to prevent its sharp decline after World War II when widespread use of the pesticide DDT and other organochlorine pesticides decimated populations. The pesticide DDT caused peregrines to lay thin-shelled eggs that broke during incubation.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers confirmed the link between DDT and egg shell thinning on peregrines in the United States. Rachel Carson, a former Service employee, helped alert the public to the hazards of pesticides on wildlife in 1962 when she published her book *Silent Spring*. Ten years later, the Environmental Protection Agency made the historic and, at the time, controversial decision to ban the use of DDT in the United States, which was the first step on the road to recovery for the peregrine.

In 1970, the Service listed the peregrine falcon as endangered under the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, the predecessor of the current law, when the population in the eastern United States had completely disappeared and populations in the west had declined by as much as 80 to 90 percent below historical levels. By 1975, the population reached an all-time low of 324 nesting pairs in North America.

The banning of DDT made the recovery of the peregrine falcon possible. But the protections provided by the Endangered Species Act and the extraordinary partnership efforts of the Service and state wildlife agencies, universities, private ornithological groups, and falcon enthusiasts accelerated the pace of recovery through captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts and the protection of nest sites during the breeding season. Similar efforts took place in Canada, where the Canadian Wildlife Service and provincial agencies took the lead in a major captive breeding and reintroduction program. Currently, there are at least 1,650 peregrine breeding pairs in the United States and Canada, well above the overall recovery goal of 631 pairs.

“The peregrine falcon is a perfect example of the success we can have when we work in partnership to recover endangered species,” said Secretary Babbitt. “With the help of the protections provided by the Endangered Species Act, and the visionary work in captive breeding and release efforts by The Peregrine Fund, the University of Minnesota’s Raptor Center and the University of California’s Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group, the peregrine flies through the skies of almost every state in the Union.”

The peregrine falcon joins the southeastern population of the brown pelican, the American alligator, the Rydberg milk-vetch, and the gray whale as graduates of the endangered species list.

Overall, government and private raptor experts have reintroduced more than 6,000 falcons into the wild since 1974. Some of the reintroductions took place in urban areas after researchers discovered that the falcons have successfully adapted to nesting on skyscrapers where they can hunt pigeons and starlings.

The peregrine will continue to be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The MBTA prohibits the taking, killing, possession, transportation, and importation of migratory birds, their eggs, parts, and nests except when specifically authorized by the Interior Department, such as in the case of regulated hunting seasons for game birds.

The Service has continued the prohibition on the take of peregrines for all purposes until management guidelines are developed in coordination with the States. The Office of Migratory Birds has issued a letter to all affected permit holders to alert them of this amendment to their permits. The Service is working with the states to develop management plans for the take of peregrines for falconry purposes.

In addition, the Service will work with state wildlife agencies, conservation organizations and others to monitor the status of the species. The Endangered Species Act requires that a species be monitored for a minimum of 5 years after delisting. The Service has decided to monitor the peregrine falcon for 13 years with surveys occurring once every 3 years, allowing for 5 surveys, to provide data that will reflect the status of at least two generations of peregrines. If it becomes evident during this period that the bird again needs the Act’s protection, the Service would relist the species.

State wildlife agencies also played a fundamental role in the recovery process by protecting nesting habitat, carrying out releases, and monitoring populations within their borders.

“The recovery of the peregrine has been a model of partnership in the conservation and recovery of an endangered species,” Babbitt said. “I hope that the success of the peregrine will inspire other communities to come together to protect and recover other vulnerable species.”

The Service’s decision to delist the peregrine falcon will be available for public inspection at the *Federal Register* on August 20, 1999.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fish and wildlife management assistance offices, and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

-FWS-

****Editors’ note:** B-roll and still photographs of peregrine falcons are available. Interviews with Service employees and other pioneers in the falconry community are also available. Press materials are available on the Service’s website at www.fws.gov